

## **§ 17.503**

Freedom of Information Act, and, if applicable, the Privacy Act and any other VA or federal confidentiality statutes.

(b) When included in a quality assurance review, confidential records protected by other confidentiality statutes such as 5 U.S.C. 552a (the Privacy Act), 38 U.S.C. 7332 (drug and alcohol abuse, sickle cell anemia, HIV infection), and 38 U.S.C. 5701 (veterans' names and addresses) retain whatever confidentiality protection they have under these laws and applicable regulations and will be handled accordingly. To the extent that information protected by 38 U.S.C. 5701 or 7332 or the Privacy Act is incorporated into quality assurance records, the information in the quality assurance records is still protected by these statutes.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5705)

### **§ 17.503 Improper disclosure.**

(a) Improper disclosure is the disclosure of confidential and privileged healthcare quality assurance review records or documents (or information contained therein), as defined in § 17.501, to any person who is not authorized access to the records or documents under the statute and the regulations in §§ 17.500 through 17.511.

(b) "Disclosure" means the communication, transmission, or conveyance in any way of any confidential and privileged quality assurance records or documents or information contained in them to any individual or organization in any form by any means.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5705)

### **§ 17.504 Disclosure methods.**

(a) Disclosure of confidential and privileged quality assurance records and documents or the information contained therein outside VA, where permitted by the statute and the regulations in §§ 17.500 through 17.511, will always be by copies, abstracts, summaries, or similar records or documents prepared by the Department of Veterans Affairs and released to the requestor. The original confidential and privileged quality assurance records and documents will not be removed from the VA facility by any person, VA employee or otherwise, except in ac-

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cordance with § 17.508(c) or where otherwise legally required.

(b) Disclosure of confidential and privileged quality assurance records and documents to authorized individuals under either § 17.508 or § 17.509 shall bear the following statement: "These documents or records (or information contained herein) are confidential and privileged under the provisions of 38 U.S.C. 5705, which provide for fines up to \$20,000 for unauthorized disclosures thereof, and the implementing regulations. This material shall not be disclosed to anyone without authorization as provided for by that law or the regulations in §§ 17.500 through 17.511."

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5705)

### **§ 17.505 Disclosure authorities.**

The VA medical facility Director, Regional Director, Under Secretary for Health, or their designees are authorized to disclose any confidential and privileged quality assurance records or documents under their control to other agencies, organizations, or individuals where 38 U.S.C. 5705 or the regulations in §§ 17.500 through 17.511 expressly provide for disclosure.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5705)

### **§ 17.506 Appeal of decision by Veterans Health Administration to deny disclosure.**

When a request for records or documents subject to the regulations in §§ 17.500 through 17.511 is denied in whole or in part by the VA medical facility Director, Regional Director or Under Secretary for Health, the VA official denying the request in whole or in part will notify the requestor in writing of the right to appeal this decision to the General Counsel of the Department of Veterans Affairs within 60 days of the date of the denial letter. The final Department decision will be made by the General Counsel or the Deputy General Counsel.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5705)

### **§ 17.507 Employee responsibilities.**

(a) All VA employees and other individuals who have access to records designated as confidential and privileged under 38 U.S.C. 5705 and the regulations in §§ 17.500 through 17.511 will treat the

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findings, views, and actions relating to quality assurance in a confidential manner.

(b) All individuals who have had access to records designated as confidential and privileged under 38 U.S.C. 5705 and the regulations in §§17.500 through 17.511 will not disclose such records or information therein to any person or organization after voluntary or involuntary termination of their relationship to the VA.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5705)

### **§ 17.508 Access to quality assurance records and documents within the agency.**

(a) Access to confidential and privileged quality assurance records and documents within the Department pursuant to this section is restricted to VA employees (including consultants and contractors of VA) who have a need for such information to perform their government duties or contractual responsibilities and who are authorized access by the VA medical facility Director, Regional Director, the Under Secretary for Health, or their designees or by the regulations in §§17.500 through 17.511.

(b) To foster continuous quality improvement, practitioners on VA rolls, whether paid or not, will have access to confidential and privileged quality assurance records and documents relating to evaluation of the care they provided.

(c) Any quality assurance record or document, whether confidential and privileged or not, may be provided to the General Counsel or any attorney within the Office of General Counsel, wherever located. These documents may also be provided to a Department of Justice (DOJ) attorney who is investigating a claim or potential claim against the VA or who is preparing for litigation involving the VA. If necessary, such a record or document may be removed from the VA medical facility to the site where the General Counsel or any attorney within the Office of General Counsel or the DOJ attorney is conducting an investigation or preparing for litigation.

(d) Any quality assurance record or document or the information contained therein, whether confidential and privi-

leged or not, will be provided to the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General upon request. A written request is not required.

(e) To the extent practicable, documents accessed under paragraph (b) of this section will not include the identity of peer reviewers. Reasonable efforts will be made to edit documents so as to protect the identities of reviewers, but the inability to completely do so will not bar access under paragraph (b).

(f) No individual shall be permitted access to confidential and privileged quality assurance records and documents identified in §17.501 unless such individual has been informed of the penalties for unauthorized disclosure. Any misuse of confidential and privileged quality assurance records or documents shall be reported to the appropriate VHA official, e.g., Service Chief, Medical Center Director.

(g) In general, confidential and privileged quality assurance records and documents will be maintained for a minimum of 3 years and may be held longer if needed for research studies or quality assurance or legal purposes.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5705)

### **§ 17.509 Authorized disclosure: Non-Department of Veterans Affairs requests.**

(a) Requests for confidential and privileged quality assurance records and documents from organizations or individuals outside VA must be made to the Department and must specify the nature and content of the information requested, to whom the information should be transmitted or disclosed, and the purpose listed in paragraphs (b) through (j) of this section for which the information requested will be used. In addition, the requestor will specify to the extent possible the beginning and final dates of the period for which disclosure or access is requested. The request must be in writing and signed by the requestor. Except as specified in paragraphs (b) and (c) of this section, these requests should be forwarded to the Director of the facility in possession of the records or documents for response. The procedures outlined in 38 CFR 1.500 through 1.584 will be followed where applicable.